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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 QUEBEC 000079

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WHA/CAN FOR BREESE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 5/17/2009

TAGS: PREL PGOV CA

SUBJECT: QUEBEC FEDERAL ELECTION PREVIEW

REF: OTTAWA 1249

CLASSIFIED BY: susan keogh, consul general, Quebec, State.  
REASON: 1.5 (B)

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¶1. Confidential - entire text.

¶2. (C) Summary: Politicians and pundits in Quebec from all persuasions were remarkably consistent on the prospects of the Liberals, Bloc Quebecois and Conservatives in the upcoming federal elections in recent conversations with DCM Kelly and CG Keogh. The forecast was for a big win for the Bloc, around 50 seats, barring complete voter fatigue on the subsidies scandal and holiday apathy among youth that is generally pro-Bloc. Currently, the Liberals trail the Bloc by 15 percent in Quebec. None of our interlocutors thought the Conservatives would win any seats although Stephen Harper's command of French made him a favored candidate in a French debate. There was general consensus, even from Liberals, that PM Martin would head a minority government. End Summary.

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BACKGROUND

¶3. (C) During DCM Steve Kelly's visit to Quebec City May 12-14, we did the rounds of provincial political figures as well as media, academic and other pundits to discuss the federal elections, expected to be announced May 23. From whatever side of the political spectrum, the views were remarkably consistent on the prospects of the Liberals, Conservatives and Bloc Quebecois. Uniformly, commentators thought there would be a minority Liberal Government in Ottawa, including Jean Pelletier (please protect), formerly Jean Chretien's Chief of Staff and recently fired from ViaRail because of the subsidies scandal. Following is a snapshot of Quebec opinion as the parties gear up for federal elections.

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LIBERAL PARTY

¶4. (C) To the extent that Paul Martin is looking for help from Quebec, he cannot expect much. The federal Liberals have taken a steep tumble in all the polls since the unraveling of the subsidies scandal. Their current standing is at 30 percent. The scandal has left Quebecers, particularly francophones, more disaffected and less likely to participate in the election. Opposition leader Bernard Landry said Quebecers were not so much disgusted or angry but rather felt scorned ("mepriser") by the actions of federal politicians.

¶5. (C) The current doldrums of Jean Charest's provincial Liberals does not mean that federal Liberal candidates will shun the PLQ. Provincial Minister for Municipal Affairs Jean-Marc Fournier said that federal candidates did want the PLQ to turn out for them and this would happen, despite PLQ discomfort over the scandal and discontent over federal interference in provincial jurisdictions like municipalities (naturally, a view not shared by beneficiary Mayor Jean Paul L'Allier). There is also the sticking point on fiscal imbalance. It probably gets down to personal contacts. Liberal MNA Margaret Delisle commented that the 50-year separation of the federal and provincial parties had never precluded campaign support. She clearly plans to help her friend Helene Scherrer, Minister of Canadian Heritage, on the hustings.

¶6. (C) Most of our interlocutors gave Helene Scherrer, the only Quebec City MP in the Cabinet, little hope of getting reelected, although Margaret Delisle was hedging her bets. Based on the "all politics is local" dictum, the "demerger" movement may be a factor negatively affecting Scherrer's campaign. Voters in towns and cities amalgamated into megacities in Quebec January 2002 have the chance to vote in a referendum on whether to withdraw. Jean-Marc Fournier said the demerger debate is impacting federal candidates, in that some are being forced to give opinions on this emotional neighborhood issue. While the demerger referendum is distinct from the federal elections, there may be some spillover in terms of voter fatigue as the referendum will occur on June 20.

¶7. (C) In addition, the election is sandwiched between

Quebec's Jean-Baptiste Day June 24 and the Canada Day July 1, when everyone is in holiday mode. Mario Dumont pointed out that the well-organized Liberal machine could profit by getting its generally older supporters to the polls. Television journalist Pierre Jobin observed that with the arrival of summer and the end of the school year, television viewing goes way down among younger voters, so that they are likely to pay less attention to campaign issues and the elections.

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CONSERVATIVE PARTY

18. (C) With the appropriate caveats, none of our contacts gave the Conservatives much chance of winning any seats in Quebec. The consensus was they have little organization on the ground and barely any candidates. Head of the Action Democratique du Quebec Mario Dumont underscored the Conservatives' lack of depth and difficulty in finding people to stand for them. He cited one example of a candidate who was being billed as being a former ADQ official: Dumont said the man had been a steward on the ADQ bus during the last provincial elections, and had been fired for incompetence.

19. (C) Nonetheless, Stephen Harper in his personal capacity received a number of positive comments. Harper has made a surprisingly strong impression among Quebec's "thinking public" because of his confident, attractive persona and good command of French. Many commented he was more bilingual than Paul Martin, whose French is perceived as halting and lacking in spontaneity. Several commentators thought Westerner Harper would do better than Quebecer Martin in a French debate, if there were one.

10. (C) Some people said Harper's mindset was much too conservative for Quebecers, but others countered that in his visits to Quebec, Harper had muted "more extreme" views (i.e. more out of step with Quebec's progressive attitudes) on social issues such as abortion and homosexuality. One dissenting note was from Jean-Marc Fournier, Minister of Municipal Affairs, who found Harper to be lacking warmth. Mario Dumont opined that Harper uses his visibility in Quebec - with or without seats - to leverage votes in Ontario. His campaign in Quebec has enhanced his image as a "country-wide" candidate. Dumont also thought the Conservatives were hoping for a big Bloc Quebecois gain as a hedge against a Liberal majority.

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BLOC QUEBECOIS

11. (C) Views on the prospects of the Bloc Quebecois also were relatively consistent. The subsidies scandal had been a godsend. Former Deputy Minister of International Relations Diane Wilhelmy, who retired from government service May 15, characterized it as "manna from heaven." Before the scandal broke, the Bloc had been dying and was considered increasingly irrelevant. Voters had a "Three times elected and what have they done for us?" attitude. Gilles Duceppe was considered a one-note leader. Now, almost everyone gave the Bloc excellent prospects in the election, with estimates of around 50 seats of a total 75, although Margaret Delisle cautioned they had gone way up and would come down somewhat by June 28. Currently the polls give the Bloc 45% of the vote.

12. (C) Bernard Landry made the generational case: younger voters favor the Parti Quebecois and by logical extension the Bloc. But as a number of our contacts noted, this does not take into account the timing of the election in mid-holiday season, along with the perennial difficulty of getting out the youth vote. Mario Dumont also commented that the polls showing 45-plus percent support in Quebec for sovereignty - the first article of both the PQ and BQ constitutions - was misleading. The three bases for sovereignty have been: threats to the French language, unequal job opportunities, and lack of political leverage. All three have been overcome. The Quebec identity has already been won, de facto, Dumont asserted. The Bloc has capitalized on the subsidies scandal but is not providing a vision for the future. Dumont thought that after a few weeks on the campaign bus, the press would be sick of hearing about misuse of taxes and would want some new ideas.

13. (C) Comment: The Bloc is riding high in Quebec at the moment. The formerly fading party began its electoral campaign May 15, without waiting for Paul Martin to blow the whistle. The platform is not new: a "Quebec Model" social agenda, regional development, and "Quebec's place in the world" (including opposition to the war in Iraq and BMD). The Bloc's new slogan "Un parti propre au Quebec," which could mean either "A clean party" or "Quebec's own party" is a double entendre allusion to the federal Liberal scandals. Dumont may be right: although the Bloc will certainly do well, it could lose some support if its campaign hammers on the misuse of federal taxes when health is clearly the most important issue for Quebecers. While the Conservatives still have poor organization here, we found it interesting that Harper is widely perceived to be more effective in French, and in debate, than PM Martin, giving him added credibility.

